

A Better Place? : Gender, Power, and Ideology in Revelation's Dys/utopia

An Honors Thesis
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by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Morrison-Atkins', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

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Abstract

Utilizing a dystopic and utopic framework for reading the gender, power, and ideology embedded within the imagery of Revelation, this paper will demonstrate the ways in which John's apocalypse arises, like all utopias and dystopias, out of the author's particular perceptions of the existing social ills within his particular socio-historical context. In order to demonstrate this particularity, the narrative and rhetorical functions of the 144,000 utopian male bodies, the dystopian ambiguity surrounding the Whore of Babylon, and the passive femininity inscribed within the Bride/New Jerusalem will be highlighted as a way of placing some critical distance between John's utopian and dystopian imaginaries and our own. In so doing, a new interpretive strategy will be proposed that paves the way for readers to critically the strengths and weaknesses of John's utopian imaginary and to re-imagine a utopia that critiques and works to correct the social and political shortcomings of contemporary communities.

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I. Gender in Revelation: Constructive or Irredeemable?

Revelation, or the Apocalypse of John, is a book that persistently begs, cries, and bargains for the unadulterated attention of the reader. Just when the audience grows comfortable (perhaps even rather bored) with one surreal, visual image, the author cuts the camera with dizzying speed to a new spectacle. As a spectacular representation of the contrast between what *is* and what *could be* is presented, the author's narrative critique of the evils plaguing his society and the possibility of a more perfect alternative begins to look less like a high-budget action film and more like the dystopian worlds depicted in Orwell's *1984* or Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. A close examination of the apparent binary contrasts in Revelation between dystopic and utopic places and bodies, as symbolized by the 144,000, the Whore of Babylon, and the "Bride" or New Jerusalem, reveals that the author's primary anxiety is the complacent submission of many of his contemporaries to the oppression of Roman Empire and a subsequent rejection of the divine rule of God and Christ. The gendered forms of the images that connote this anxiety arise out of the gendered ideology of passivity and activity that abounded in the ancient Mediterranean world. This ideology, which associated social or sexual forms of submissiveness or passivity with femininity and social or sexual conquest or activity with masculinity, thus becomes the medium through which John attempts to reject the status quo and to empower others to do likewise (Moore 2001: 191).

Thus, I propose that Revelation, or the Apocalypse of John, is a narration of a dystopic world in which the "wrong kind" of subordination, namely submission to the Roman Empire, ends in a violent, panicked expression of destructive masculinity. In its, or rather "her," place an imagined all-male utopia is reinstated in which any possibility of threatening feminization appear

to be removed from the realm of possibility, and a thoroughly masculine alternative subordination is proposed. What the author fails to recognize, however, are the ways in which his perceptions of a possible dystopic future refuse to be entirely eradicated, but creep into his fantastic vision of an all-male, all-masculine utopia. In what follows, I intend to demonstrate the ways in which John's apocalypse arises, like all utopias and dystopias, out of the author's particular perceptions of the existing social ills within his particular socio-historical context. In order to demonstrate this particularity, I intend to highlight the narrative and rhetorical functions of the 144,000 utopian male bodies, the dystopian ambiguity surrounding the Whore of Babylon, and the passive femininity inscribed within the Bride/New Jerusalem as a way of placing some critical distance between John's utopian and dystopian imaginaries and our own. In so doing, I will propose that the liminal temporal state of utopian visions as both fully realized and not yet enacted opens up space for re-evaluation and re-imagination of the utopian vision we have inherited from John.

This gendered language and imagery of violence, sexuality, and destruction in the book of Revelation have proven to be powerfully divisive forces for many feminist biblical scholars. In particular, the visions of the 144,000 "pure" male virgins, the Whore of Babylon, and the passive Bride/New Jerusalem have posed the most substantial challenges to gender critical scholars, as these images and the visions in which they are contained have been read to imply a potentially dangerous and pervasive hatred of female bodies and a valorization of violence against women.

Thus, much of the available scholarship regarding gender and sexuality in Revelation is implicitly or explicitly aligned with one of two rather oppositional camps. One such community of scholars regards the gendered language and symbolism in Revelation as an unpleasant

convention secondary to a larger message of hope, while still others claim that Revelation is irredeemably harmful to women and other marginalized groups. However, as a Christian as well as a feminist, I find that neither response provides ample interpretive space for those who are troubled by the gendered and sexual imagery Revelation espouses but still feel that it is a useful and constructive book for women and men alike.

Prior to undertaking a new critical approach to Revelation, however, it is necessary to review the most the most prevalent voices in both interpretive communities in order to foster an interpretation that blends, complicates, and adds to the existing conversation. Among the group of scholars who struggle with Revelation's visions, Hanna Stenström grapples with the misogynistic implications of Revelation's purity language, arguing that "male and pure" is the only way that Revelation conceives of Christian identity. She claims that the imaginary, ideal world of Revelation is wholly androcentric, since both "good" and "bad" are grammatically and physically male-identified as the text focuses on contrasting actions of the 144,000 virgins with those of the men on Earth (2009: 46,49).

Stenström is not the only scholar to be troubled by the silencing of women subsumed under masculine grammatical structures. Økland argues that John's depiction of a "blissful elsewhere" is mired in grammatically gendered maleness that contributes to gendering beyond the text. She asserts, "in my view, Revelation's elsewhere is a gendered place in that a group of males lives on and off the female ground" (2009:105). However, Økland is optimistic that the female-identified city can be functioning subversively in the text by speaking beyond the discourse to which she is entitled by the masculine figures (2009:102). Because so many scholars have closely examined the troubling gendered and sexual elements of Revelation and found it lacking in constructive power, a conflict has arisen in the biblical scholarship regarding

how much emphasis should be placed on gender and sexuality in interpretations of this heavily symbolic and disorienting book.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, as part of a group of feminist scholars who feel that using gender as the primary starting point for interpreting Revelation detracts from its greater message of liberation from oppression, argues that attempts to deconstruct the gendered and sexual imagery in Revelation do not oppose but actually reaffirm gender as a basic and universal category of analysis (1998: 216). She asserts that oppression in Revelation, and in the contemporary world as well, can not be wholly described as “patriarchy,” in which man over woman is the foundational structure of domination. Rather, she conceives of oppression as “kyriarchal,” or based on interlocking systems of oppression including that of race, status, religion, as well as gender (1998:228). Therefore, interpretations that focus solely on gender fail to recognize and lend legitimacy to other relations of power at work in the text and the ways in which they relate to and intertwine with constructions of gender and sexuality.

Schüssler Fiorenza also argues that the androcentric language of Revelation is a gender inclusive, conventional linguistic tool used to “enable writers and readers to negotiate linguistic tensions and inscribed ambiguities and thereby to create meaning in specific contexts and socio-political situations” (1998:213). Thus, rather than focusing on gendered language and symbolism as a starting point for interpretation, “one must explore its politics of meaning in order to adjudicate whether the discourse of Revelation is misogynist” as part of a broader historical and social context (1998: 209). To counteract this tendency to place undue emphasis on gendered language, Schüssler Fiorenza calls for a “fitting theo-ethical response” to the book of Revelation that recognizes the limited applicability of Revelation, which limits the book's applicability to only those “socio-political situations that cry out for justice” (1991: 139).

Still others, such as Barbara Rossing, expand the notion of the conventionality of androcentric language into the realm of the literary. She argues that the gendered symbolism and language of Revelation is deployed to rhetorically signal the necessity of an ethical choice between The New Jerusalem and Rome. She claims that what has been read as misogyny and essentialization of femininity is actually reflective of an ancient literary convention that readers would have recognized as a call to align themselves with the “good” woman, or righteous ethical choice (Rossing 1999:14). Thus, after the literary convention has served its rhetorical purpose, the image is transformed from that of human bodies to that of cities or empires (Rossing 1999:14). Rossing claims that the transformation from women to city imagery “function as rhetorical markers at crucial points, heightening the element of political and economic critique of Babylon” (1999:61). Thus, any reading of gender that extends beyond the “two women *topos*” does not account for the mutability of symbols in Revelation and trades the book’s exhortative function to reject economic exploitation for one of vitriolic essentialization of the feminine.

It is my contention, however, that overlooking the gendered imagery and language as “conventional” is not at all easy to do, as John’s revelation consistently conceives of both oppression and justice in quite gendered ways. Furthermore, because Revelation’s gendered and violent end-times symbolism has been co-opted for the maintenance of gendered oppression in contemporary cultures and communities, it that becomes increasingly important to consider conceptions of gender and sexuality in the text. Examining the archetypically gendered figures as part of John’s utopic and dystopic rhetoric can be a fruitful way to respond to and to challenge our conceptions of “ideal” femininity as well as masculinity in our contemporary cultures and religious communities. Thus, I propose a new kind of “fitting response” to the book of Revelation that recognizes the critical strengths and weakness in John’s vision of a dystopic

present and an ideal future that provides a foundation upon which contemporary readers can begin to envision and enact a new, more constructive and inclusive vision of the utopic possibilities of our particular historical, social, and political contexts.

On the other side of this divide abide scholars, such as Tina Pippin and Stephen Moore, who have had more trouble separating the message from its medium and reject the gendered language of Revelation as irredeemably painful to both women and men alike. While Schüssler Fiorenza and Rossing weigh ethical readings of Revelation based on its first-century environment and conventions of meaning against their contemporary applicability in situations of imperial/economic subjugation, Pippin argues that Revelation's language is not mere convention but speaks of past and future conditions for women who are identified in and identify with this text (Pippin 1993: 126). In opposition to Schüssler Fiorenza's notion that women read Revelation as "common literature" with whose humanist values and visions they could identify," Pippin asserts that "reading for the 'lives' of the females in the text exposes the deep misogyny of this vision of the end of the world" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1991:14, Pippin 1992:46). Pippin argues that John's "utopia" amounts to what she refers to as an "apocalypse of women" in which misogyny, heterosexism, racism, and violence constitute an all-encompassing retaliation against women as women (Pippin 1992:47). Thus, the violence of the apocalypse overturns the existing order and "dumps all the women out," leaving females no established place in the New Jerusalem, even as they play an instrumental role in bringing it about, as proto-typical "Bride" or "Whore" (Pippin 1992: 91).

As a result, many argue that the book of Revelation requires an elevated hermeneutic of suspicion. This reading strategy, proposed by Schüssler Fiorenza, does not assume that an androcentric text is inherently authoritative but critically examines its portrayal of women. This

perspective on womanhood is then evaluated against the experiences of real women in order to adjudicate whether the text should be considered dangerous and marginalizing for women (Schüssler Fiorenza 2001: 153). This same hermeneutic of suspicion has led Pippin, Strenström, and others to note the forced passivity and stereotypical roles granted to women in Revelation. According to Strenström, women in the text represent the “chaotic, lethal powers that lead men from God,” and always, “at least potentially, prostitutes or adulteresses, seductive, dangerous and strange” (2009 38). Pippin echoes this sentiment by arguing that the “female figures in the Apocalypse are given symbolic names and symbolic tasks; they are not allowed to speak their own identity” (1992:103). These symbolic roles as prototypical whore or bride do not open up space for women in John’s imagined utopia, but rather implicitly prescribe ways of being for women in and beyond the text. Woman, both within and without the text, are meant to follow the example of the passive bride whose identity is entirely subsumed under her relationship to the Lamb (Pippin 1992:106). Thus, these scholars propose that this imaginary New Jerusalem is not only entirely male and masculine, but also exhibits the power of male conquest in the apparent eradication and violent removal of all aberrant femininity.

Stephen Moore, too, examines the key concept of Revelation as the masculine “conquering” of feminine “submission” to the oppression of the Roman Empire (Moore 2001:184,190). Furthermore, Moore suggests that the establishment of God’s kingdom on Earth may be more about “engendering masculinity, to make men” than overturning unjust economic and political circumstances (2001: 177). The Jesus of Revelation, then, is “not so much God become *man* as God become *masculine*, and this divine masculinity is both established and maintained by conquering the ubiquitous threat of the feminine” (2001: 190-191). Focusing on divine masculinity in Revelation, which he perceives as maintained in large part by violence

against women, Moore ultimately addresses the ways in which the God of Revelation enacts and reenacts, in rather unsettling ways, our contemporary conflation of masculinity and violence (Moore 2001:199). Thus, it is not just the language and literary conventions that are gendered in the text, but its conflicts and resolutions are cast in implicitly hierarchical gender categories as well. However, I do not agree, as many of these scholars seem to be arguing, that the disconcerting gendered and sexual imagery in this text is grounds for deeming it an altogether harmful and exclusive work. Rather, as I will argue, the dys/utopic elements of Revelation can be reappropriated as a fruitful way to examine and resist the ideology of gendered and sexual oppression in our own cultures and communities.

Thus, feminist and gender critical scholarship on Revelation appears to have reached a seemingly insurmountable stalemate in which each implicitly (or explicitly) accuses the other of reaffirming and maintaining existing gender hierarchies and structures of oppression. As a Christian woman who is troubled by the gendered imagery but maintains Revelation as an important and hopeful text, I feel ostracized by both approaches. For these reasons, I argue that feminist, gender critical scholarship on Revelation fails to sufficiently examine the troubling constructions of “ideal” femininity *and* masculinity embedded within the text which work together to define what kinds bodies are to be perceived as utopic or dystopic. By introducing a third approach, based on highlighting the use of dystopic and utopic rhetoric in the text, I will delineate an interpretation which makes space for those who are troubled by gender representations in the text but still find Revelation to be constructive.

II. A Problem of Action: The Characteristics and Function of Dystopias and Utopias

Before outlining my proposal for movement beyond this gridlock, I will first present a diagnosis of a major interpretive question burdening both types of interpretation. Simply put, this question is: How do we enact the ideal (or utopic) world presented in Revelation? Framed in large part based on Mary Ann Beavis' discussion of ancient utopic literary convention which differentiates between "high" and "low" utopic discourse, this question diagnoses a major problem of action embedded within the book of Revelation that has, in part, led to the conflict regarding gender and sexual imagery in John's visions. According to Beavis, "low utopias" were those, like Plato's *Laws*, that were meant to be implemented as social and political realities. "High utopias," on the other hand, were not meant to be employed but were rather intended to serve as models for political reform (Beavis 2006: 10-11). Placed within this framework, scholars such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza envision Revelation's world as a "high utopia" that does not represent an actual prescriptive reality, but points to the existence of larger systemic social issues as contrast to a universal ideal. Less optimistic scholars, like Pippin, read Revelation as a "low utopia,"—or *outopia* (no place), for women—meant to be deployed as a socio-political reality. Thus, both of the prevailing interpretations of gender in Revelation can be situated in terms of the role of men and women in John's ideal, or utopic, discourse.

Because the present stalemate in feminist biblical scholarship could be said to amount to a problem of action inherent to conceptions of *utopia* (How do we enact John's ideal world? And, if so, should we?), assessing the applicability and usefulness of John's visions must draw attention to the function of gender and sexuality as part of John's *dystopic* imaginary in unanticipated and unforeseeable ways. In gazing both into and beyond the disconcerting gendered and sexual imagery, we may then recognize the wider relationships of power and

ideology in which these images are implicated in order to determine whether or not this vision of an ideal world is at all constructive for contemporary audiences, male or female.

Some context and description of these terms, then, is necessary. Although the term “utopia” was not coined until Sir Thomas More’s famous work, *Utopia*, in 1516, Mary Ann Beavis and others have argued that the literary conventions used by More would have been recognizable to those in the ancient world who undertook similar literary ventures (2006:2). The description of ideal communities, both in narrative and in practice, was common to the ancient Hebrews as well as the ancient Greeks, and Revelation’s author would have been intimately familiar with these literary templates.

Utopic discourse, which inhabits a compelling border space between “*eu*” and “*ou*”, or “good” and “no” place, respectively, imagines a reality in which all social evils and perversions are smoothed out and life passes harmoniously without conflict or displeasure (Schweitzer 2006: 19). Furthermore social ills are implied rather than directly evoked in utopic discourse. “Dystopia,” on the other hand, comes from the Greek for “bad/abnormal place,” and envisions what the author perceives to be the logical consequences of the extrapolation of the status quo (Schweitzer 2006:16). Although they seem to envision the totality of quite different aspects of society, either the extreme good or the extreme evil, both utopic and dystopic narratives attempt to demonstrate ways in which we may opt out of or extend beyond oppression, dissatisfaction, or difference by eradicating perceived social evils. Put succinctly, utopic imaginaries tell us *how* we may be perfect, while dystopic imaginaries tell us *why* we are not. In this way, both work to critique existing ideologies and attempt to propose a universally desirable alternative reality.

While John’s New Jerusalem *utopia* has been the subject of much debate, precious little critical attention has been paid to the ways in which John’s vision also functions in dystopic

ways. Although I do not intend to argue for or against the existence of dystopia as an ancient literary genre, I do hope to demonstrate how viewing Revelation through a framework of dystopic warning helps to see the function of gender and sexual imagery as inherently unstable and out of John's control. Sargent defines dystopia as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived" (cited in McAlear 2010: 25). This hyperbolic expansion of an alternative reality, however, must bear significant resemblance to the socio-political situation of the audience so that the outcomes in the narrative world become a "real world" possibility if situations and behaviors are not altered. Thus, the socio-political situation depicted in John's dystopic imaginary emphasizes and embellishes the possible consequences of continued subservience to the Roman Empire by groundings it in existing ideologies of the relationships of gender to power, routed through rhetorical images such as the 144,000, the Whore of Babylon, and The Bride/New Jerusalem in order to map his perception of the "right kind" of desires onto existing ideological perceptions of body, space, and time.

Thus, the persuasive power that governs dystopic narratives is "fear," which exhorts an audience to take steps to avoid the presented outcome and makes readers feel both threatened and empowered to resist (McAlear 2010: 26). It is precisely this rhetoric of fear that differentiates utopic from dystopic strategies. Utopias often present a more subtle critique of social iniquities by imagining a space emptied of them, while dystopias exaggerate these ills by presenting them as immanently present just around the bend. Thus, dystopic rhetoric recasts and exaggerates the ideology of a particular society in order to jar its audience out of a state of complacency and into one of resistance (McAlear 2010: 25-26).

Thus, dystopia presents a world in which nightmarish circumstances and the possibility of change occur simultaneously in two temporal spaces--the present and the future. This disorienting temporality is a crucially important element of dystopia that is especially useful as we navigate the gendered and sexual imagery and their inherent complexities within John's apocalypse. McAlear asserts that, "Due to the temporal dimension of dystopian narratives, there is always a space between the represented world and the reader's world in which to stage resistance and alter history. In this way dystopian literature uses temporality to endow the reader with the ability to create social change" (2010: 28). Thus, John's narrative internalizes and instills fear in his audience by dismantling the comfort of linear time. As the text scrambles between the audience's past, the narrative past, John's present, and two imagined futures—one ideal and one hellacious—it is never fully clear what has happened, what is happening, and what could happen if social ills are not corrected. This manipulation of time lends an urgency to the text that motivates the audience to action. The ambiguous and disorienting nature of time in Revelation may also help explain the dissonance among readings of gender and sexuality in Revelation, as their function is difficult to map without an awareness of their temporal situation in the narrative. Thus, in my application, I hope to demonstrate that more thoroughly investigating the temporal setting of gendered and sexual symbols will help us point toward a more nuanced interpretation of their use in the text and a clearer assessment of their contemporary functions.

In what follows, I will refer to the close relationship between John's dystopic and utopic imaginaries as "dys/utopic" in order to account for the ways in which these symbolic worlds share tendencies of the other and are not, for John, diametrically opposed or entirely separate spaces. This notion is further supported by Beavis who, in her review of ancient biblical utopias,

asserts that “utopia (the longed-for divinely ordained national ideal) and dystopia (the often-deplored sociopolitical reality) exist side by side in the theological imaginations of the biblical authors” (2006: 39). This awareness of the near-future horrors of sustained wrongdoing as well as the possibility of a divinely enacted paradise, I argue, are an integral part of the rhetoric of John’s vision. Interpreting Revelation in this way not only provides new insight into John’s literary motives, but also reaffirms Revelation’s underlying message of resistance and re-imagination that adamantly compels readers to reject the maintenance of any existing oppression and to conceive of a perfected society in a way that is constructive, practical, and transcendent.

Dys/utopic discourses are an important framework through which to interpret the gendered and sexual imagery and language embedded within the book of Revelation, as John seems to be working with notions of fear embodied in a possible, nightmarish near future while proposing the possibility of an ideal solution. In Revelation, John is reacting to a particular social evil—the complacent submissiveness, and even complicity, of Christian communities to the oppression of the Roman Empire. While John is certainly working with dys/utopic ideologies of place, I will argue John’s narrative extends beyond *place* and also maps these perceptions onto archetypically gendered bodies, places, and times. However, I will propose that undertaking a critical examination of the liminality as well as apparent instability and unsustainability of John’s utopian imaginary allows for, and even insists upon, redefinition of his ideal.

III. Gender, Power, and Ideology: Biblical Approaches and Critical Theories

This reading of dys/utopian discourse engages a variety of biblical scholars and critical theorists addressing issues of gender, power, and ideology. These include the Revelation scholars

previously discussed as well as several other key thinkers and theorists such as Ken Stone and Gale Yee, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Thus, delineating some key concepts and themes will be necessary prior to investigating their applications and effects in the imaginary world we have inherited from John.

Gender criticism, according to Ken Stone, involves underscoring the importance of gender in cultures by analyzing the deployment of notions of *both* masculinity and femininity in cultural products and “problematizing these same notions as objects of analysis” (2007:184). For example, one way to problematize the notion of gender as an object of analysis is to demonstrate that these categories do not operate benignly but function hierarchically to reinstall relationships of power between and among different kinds of men and women (Stone 2007: 183). Thus, gender critical interpretations of cultural products, like biblical texts, examine the use of gendered language, imagery, and symbolism in order to highlight instances in which gender categories seem to be breaking strictly defined cultural conceptions of “appropriate” gender comportment. Highlighting these unstable moments helps to destabilize the binary gender system that asserts itself as “natural.” Stone also proposes that gender may be destabilized by recognizing that “in a world (real or literary) where ‘feminine men’ and ‘manly women’ are thinkable (even if such persons are considered frightening or stigmatized), we have moved outside of stable, binary notions of gender into something more fluid and ambiguous” (2007:189). This notion will be crucially important to the following interpretation of Revelation as a simultaneously dys/utopian text, particularly as we look to how John’s visions conceive of the power of male purity and feminine temptation.

Like gender criticism, ideological criticism is another scholastic approach that is inextricably tied to relationships of power. Although the term “ideology” has taken on a rather

pejorative connotation as a set of ideas and doctrines that some undesirable political entity “has,” Gale Yee and other critical theorists argue that ideology refers to “a complex system of values, ideas, pictures, images, and perceptions that motivate men and women to ‘see’ their particular place in the social order as natural, inevitable, and necessary” (2007:140). Ideology helps us to navigate existential complications such as our place in the world and our function in society by constructing a reality that seems, but is not altogether, “real.” Ideologies can be manipulated and utilized by socially dominant groups in order to promote a certain way of life as natural and normal while negatively sanctioning ideologies that deviate from the established norm. Like efforts to destabilize gender in texts, ideological approaches highlight crucial omissions or ideas and voices that run contrary to the “truth” the text is trying to promote (Yee 2007: 143). For example, the ideology of submission to a more powerful force is an integral part of both dys/utopian imaginaries in Revelation and is utilized to naturalize certain relationships of power between John’s community and the Roman Empire as well as between John’s community and the divine.

Strongly influencing these approaches to the biblical texts are the critical work of theorists such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. To begin, Michel Foucault’s analytics of power have proven to be vitally important to later theorists of gender, power, and ideology, and will therefore need to be explicated quite briefly prior to their application in my proposed dys/utopic reading of Revelation. Although we are apt to conceive of power as strictly prohibitive, Foucault argues that power works in much more ubiquitous and subtle ways than the enforcement of laws and “thou shalt nots” (Foucault 1990: 90). Rather, Foucault argues that power cannot be “held” by some people over others, contrary to popular conceptions of the relationships between rulers and the ruled (1990: 94). Instead, structures of

power are “a multiplicity of force relations” which exist in relationships and are directly related to knowledge and discourse (1990:92, 95). Thus, power works not by saying “no,” but rather by eliciting “yeses” through discursive practices that arrange people and internalize understandings of the world based on things that we all “know” to be true. Furthermore, power not only works to arrange people externally and socially, but also internally by pushing individuals to police their actions, behaviors, and identities against the agreed upon “norm” (Foucault 1991:59-60).

However, these discourses which serve to internalize, arrange, and discipline people based on what is “allowed” to be said, known, and understood can “be both an instrument and effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance, and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault 1990: 101). Therefore, by pointing to instabilities embedded within a prevailing discourse (such as the notion that submissiveness is inherently feminine), we are able to begin to deconstruct its meaning and resist its power.

This rather counter-intuitive conception of power as relationship has been extremely influential to the gender-destabilizing work of Judith Butler. Her understanding of gender as *performative* and her discomfort with the oppressive function of identity categories provide ample tools that, when applied, reveal the inherent instability of the “normal.” Butler interrogates and works against normalization by asserting that all identity is performative, or constituted by the repetition of specific actions and postures that allow one to be “intelligible” as a specific kind of body (Butler 1990: 24-25). Gender, therefore, is not “natural,” or self-evidently asserted at birth, but actually requires a surprising amount of effort in order to seem stable.

Furthermore, Butler asserts, “to qualify as a substantive identity is an arduous task, for such appearances are rule-generated identities, ones which rely on the consistent and repeated invocation of rules that constrain and restrict cultural practices of intelligible identity” (Butler

1990:144-145). Thus, the “correct” performance of one’s gender or identity is compulsory if one wishes to avoid the social punishments, such as ostracism or alienation, that follow the transgression of the boundaries of the “normal” (Butler 1991:24). According to Butler, “being normal” requires the constant posturing of oneself in relation to an ideal of the “real” that does not, and can not, actually exist (Butler 1991: 21). However, because “repetition never fully accomplishes identity,” there is always the possibility of a subversive repetition that belies the stability of these norms and open up space for a reconstitution of these standards. Butler argues that subversive and parodic repetitions of sexual and gender norms serve to underscore “the utterly constructed status of the so-called original” (Butler 1991:23). Thus, calling notice to the “trouble” inherent to standards of the normal and rendering them unstable exposes them as imitation and detracts from their oppressive power.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has also undertaken to examine the relationship between sex, gender, and power. In her study of male homosociality in literature, Sedgwick takes as her goal “to explore the ways in which the shapes of sexuality, and what *counts* as sexuality, both depend on and affect historical power relationships. A corollary is that in a society where men and women differ in their access to power, there will be important gender differences, as well, in the structure and constitution of sexuality” (1985:2). She argues that the relationship between gender, sexuality, and political power are historically fluid and capable of redefinition.

Furthermore, she asserts that analyzing texts strictly in terms of gender neglects important factors such as class and race and implies that gender categories are “the most radical division of human experience, and a relatively unchanging one” (1985:11). Further, she asserts that a variety of important issues such as “entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homosexuality” are closely tied to class, women, and the dualistic gender system (1985:2). Thus, an analysis of

gender and sexuality in a text must take into account the ways in which relationships of power, whether economic, racial, or gendered, are all related to one another. In this way, dismantling or destabilizing any one of these systems must therefore seek to have an effect on another.

Sedgwick, like Butler, helps us point to moments in texts and cultural products in which our understanding of gender and sexuality fail to live up to culturally sanctioned standards of the normal. In her analysis of erotic triangulation in English literature, she argues that “the status of women, and the whole question of arrangements between genders, is deeply and inescapably inscribed in the structure even of relationships that seem to exclude women—even in male homosocial/homosexual relationships” (1985:25). Thus, she asserts that women often function as vehicles through which men are able to enact their desire for one another and solidify masculine homosocial bonds. Thus, women are vitally important for defining both heterosexuality and homosexuality (1985:27).

IV. Application: Re-evaluating and Re-imagining Revelation’s Utopia

Having outlined the trends of gender critical scholarship on the book of Revelation as well as key features of dys/utopic literature and relevant critical approaches to the biblical texts, it is now necessary to apply these ideas to an interpretation of Revelation that seeks to highlight the unstable moments that undermine the power of gendered and sexual imagery as part of John’s imagined dys/utopia. In so doing, I will progress toward a new reading strategy for these images that incorporates and reworks the most constructive elements of both of the major avenues of feminist scholarship. In order to do so, I will first highlight the ways in which the text alludes to a primary anxiety regarding submission to the Roman Empire. Then, I will point to the example of Jezebel’s sexualized destruction as John’s initial entreatment to readers to participate

in visions which highlight the catastrophic consequences of the maintenance of existing social ills as well as a possible ideal future solution to these systemic issues. I will then delineate the manner by which gendered and sexual imagery works in the text to underscore John's dystopic critique and utopic proposal by rhetorically aligning both with desirable and undesirable bodies, places, and temporal settings. Finally, I will undertake a critical evaluation of the New Jerusalem as John's ideal temporal and spatial location in order to highlight the manner by which John's utopia reinscribes rather than resists existing ideologies and systemic social ills as well as its inherent instability, unsustainability, and perhaps even undesirability. In this way, I will conclude that the liminal temporal state of any utopia grants a community power to reconstruct ideals through constant re-evaluation and re-imagination.

As has already been stated, for John's dystopic rhetoric of "fear" to be effective, he must first develop a specific social deviancy and then map it onto a hellacious future setting that will "make the most readers simultaneously feel personally threatened and empowered to resist" (Sisk 1997:11). Therefore, we must substantiate the claim that John's anxiety arises out of a critical awareness of complacent, and markedly feminine, submission of his counterparts to the Roman Empire. First, a rhetorical sense of fear and dread is built as a series of visions of divinely sanctioned violence against those who "do not have the seal of God on their foreheads," including five months of torture "like the torture of a scorpion when it stings someone" without hope of the release of death are narrated. This painfully detailed imagery forces the audience to view the consequences of John's social critique before they are made aware of the social evils which led to such destructive wrath (9.4-5).

At long last, the suspense is lifted and John allows his frightened audience a glimpse of the behaviors that have led to such drastic consequences. In the vision of the Whore of Babylon,

which worked symbolically as a code for the Roman Empire, the angel accompanying John states that it is with this woman that “the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk” (17.2).

Furthermore, John’s community has apparently been convinced that they have benefitted from this exchange with the Roman empire, as “the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury” (18.3). In this scenario, both the rulers and the subjects of John’s community have submitted themselves to the power of the Roman Empire and have undertaken actions that have called their masculinity into question. In the destruction of the Whore and the warning that those who continue to align themselves with her will “share in her plagues,” John presents a vision of a dystopic future that attempts to convince his audience to “Come out of her”—an exhortation dripping with sexual connotation—and to desire another body, the New Jerusalem, instead (18.4).

Bearing this anxiety in mind, it is necessary to return to the opening framework of Revelation in order to highlight the ways in which Jezebel’s destruction is an initial signal to his audience that the wrong kind of submissiveness will be met with catastrophic consequences. In the first four of the seven letters to seven unique communities, ostensibly dictated by Christ himself, John introduces and then, as we will see, nightmarishly expands a transgression which several of these communities share—submission to the teachings of “other” prophets (2.6, 2.14, 2.20). In each letter, this critique of the submission of many of the assemblies to feminine influence will be counteracted by a pervasive rhetoric of conquest and a reinstatement of a kind of power based on Christ.

John’s letters vehemently deride accepting and submitting to the teachings of those, such as the Nicolaitans or Balaam, “who put a stumbling block to the people of Israel, so that they

would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication” (2.14). This divine scolding, however, does not turn violent until a woman prophet, sardonically named “Jezebel” after the temptress of II Kings, is introduced. Noting the reference in the letter to an actual woman, Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that this verse should be read “against the grain” of the text in order to note that “one of the renowned leaders of the churches in Asia Minor was a wo/man who could claim the official title ‘prophet’” (1998:233). Furthermore, she asserts that John vilifies all other prophets mentioned in the letters, both male and female, and not simply Jezebel as a woman (1998:223).

However, I argue that the extended attention paid to Jezebel and the extremely violent and sexual manner with which she is punished call for more critical attention than merely stating that John is threatened by the competition of other teachers. Whereas the criticism levied against those perceived to be adhering to the teachings of male-designated prophets and teachers is marked only by repetition of the phrase “I have this against you,” adherents to the feminine influence of Jezebel are given a violent reminder of the authority, and masculinity that John envisions for himself (2.14-15, 2.20). John beseeches the audience to view the spectacle of violence against Jezebel stating, “Beware, I am throwing her on a bed,” and “I will strike her children dead” it seems that something much more menacing is at work than mere prophetic competition. True to his dystopic critique of the present, John is working rhetorically to empower his audience to act in like fashion against the existence of feminizing influences and to submit themselves to the masculine figure of Jesus who “gives to each of you as your works deserve” (2.22-23). This destruction also works as a warning, as the spectators are told to “Beware” that similar fates will befall them if they “do not repent of her doings” (2.22). Thus, working through these first four letters, John signals the presence of dystopic bodies and places as he gestures

toward his primary anxiety in Revelation's dystopic imaginary—the feminization of Christian communities through their complacent submission to Roman imperial control.

This divine violence against feminizing influence signals a shift in time to a possible near future that is so strikingly characteristic of dystopian rhetoric. Immediately following the sexualized violence and reinstatement of masculine power enacted against Jezebel, the letters to the communities in Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea begin to threaten of the possibility of Christ's return to punish if changes are not made both inside and outside of these assemblies. To those in Sardis, Jesus states, "*If you do not wake up*, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you" (3.3, emphasis mine). Furthermore, the Synagogue of Satan who allegedly persecutes the Philadelphian community will be forced to bow to those in Philadelphia and, rather menacingly, "they will learn that I have loved you" (3.9). Thus, in these seven letters, John lays the groundwork for the enactment of his dys/utopic rhetorical aims in later visions of dystopic destruction and utopic possibility. This sexually violent destruction of Jezebel and its embedded message of empowerment to resist bring the reader into an awareness of John's anxiety regarding submission to the "wrong kind" of authority, which becomes more specific as his visions progress to the Whore of Babylon and her association with the pervasive evils of the Roman Empire.

Having given insight into the nature of his social critique, John then moves toward a simultaneous evaluation of the negative implications and consequences of passive submission against the possibilities of his utopian ideal. Because, as Marin concludes, "Utopia is an ideological critique of ideology," John maps his vision of dystopic terrors as well as utopic potential onto ideological understandings of bodies, places, and conceptions of time that would have been readily accessible both to him and to his readers (1993:11). By appealing to

ideological understandings of gender hierarchies, “natural” bodies, and desirable temporal and spatial locations, John attempts to ignite in his audience a sense of the urgency of resistance to the current socio-political situation as well a spirit of striving toward that which he feels is “universally” appealing and desirable. However, a critical examination of the visions of the 144,000 male virgins, the Whore of Babylon, and the Bride/New Jerusalem (in which particular visions of “right” and “wrong” kinds of bodies, spaces, and times are enacted) reveals that the differences between his utopic and dystopic imaginaries are not always clear.

In the first of these visions, the audience meets a group of 144,000 followers of the Lamb who have “his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads” (14.1). It is this group of male virgins “who have not defiled themselves with women” that allegedly constitute the entirety of humanity that is “redeemed from the earth” (14.3-4). Rightly so, how much valence to place on the 144,000 male virgins as constituting the entirety of saved humanity has been a major point of contention in feminist scholarship. Pippin notes 14.4 as the point in the text in which “women are most notably absent” and conclusively states that the 144,000 “represent the whole of the faithful, and they are all men” (1992:70). Stenström echoes this as she asserts, “the contrast between the 144,000 and women in 14.4a logically makes the 144,000 a male community” (2006:41). On the other hand, Schüssler Fiorenza proposes that this group should not be read as entirely composed of men, because “such a misogynist stance appears nowhere else in Revelation” (1991:88).

Thus, navigating the existing scholarship seems to produce precious little interpretive space for those who are hesitant to argue that this text implies that salvation is gendered but who are also not convinced that Revelation is not saturated with rather misogynist symbols and imagery. However, if the reader approaches the 144,000 as a representation of an ideal type of

body within John's dys/utopic discourse, we can begin to deconstruct John's conception of ideal masculinity and highlight the ways in which it functions for John as a site of an attempt to contest the ideology of masculinity harbored by the Roman imperial oppressors. As John fails to critique, but rather reinscribes this ideology, we begin to see how the feminine creeps into and becomes essential to John's imagined ideal.

To begin, the 144,000 inhabit a particular type of masculine body that is utterly removed from the "polluting" influence of women (14.4). This notion that men could be "real men" and live a celibate lifestyle would likely have been a potent resistance not only to the Roman conception of manhood as demonstrated by penetrative sex, but also to prevailing imperial ideologies which equated the reproductive family unit with loyalty to the Roman Empire (Huber 2006:177). Thus, John posits that the utopic male bodies of the 144,000 are reaffirmed and stabilized by their lack of contact with women, as no feminine traits have "rubbed off" and dismantled the purity of their utter manliness. However, this representation of utopian bodies is not at all naturally occurring, but must be continually reconstituted as such through both performance and bodily inscription. The inscription of "his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads" combined with their rigid avoidance of physical contact with women operate as a strictly regulated and regulative frame through which these males can be intelligibly read as ideally masculine (14.1).

These actions and appearances illuminate the strenuous work required for the 144,000 to produce bodies that can be read as the ideal combination of "masculine" and "Christian." To begin, Butler's notion of performativity is manifested in particularly interesting ways as the 144,000 must constantly perform "a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders" in order to reinstate their belonging in the category of saved,

male humanity (14.3). However, as Judith Butler has noted, “to qualify as a substantive identity is an arduous task, for such appearances are rule-generated identities, ones which rely on the consistent and repeated invocation of rules that constrain and restrict cultural practices of intelligible identity” (1990:141-145). John’s ideal masculinity attempts to cast as “normal” and desirable an ideal masculinity that not only functions to restrict the range of acceptable behaviors for those who are subsumed under the sign of “male,” but also works to exclude those who do not fit within this frame. Thus, even as this elite group has the exclusive knowledge of particular scripts, they are regulated by the necessity to repeat these lines in order to make their identification as part of this group seem natural and self-evident.

Further destabilizing the utopic masculinity John posits are the ways in which the language used to denote this ideally masculine lack of physical and sexual contact and inscription of the seal of the Lamb on their bodies is quite strikingly feminine (Okland 2006:99). Because “valorization of lifelong virginity is rather foreign to most other ancient Mediterranean discourse,” the only available word to describe their celibacy, *parthenoi*, would have been typically used to denote a mature young woman (Okland 2006: 97-98). Therefore, immediately embedded within John’s vision of embodied utopia is the undeniable association with the very polluting influence the men must seek to avoid. Appending a grammatically masculine plural ending, *oi*, to a word most typically associated with womanhood allows for a reading of John’s ideal as a large group of “womanish men.” Thus, if we return to Stone’s understanding of the gender fluidity inherent to intelligible conceptions of “feminine men” and “manly women,” John’s 144,000 ideal “men” seem to be working against the hierarchal gender binaries that he intends to instill and the specter feminine is able to reassert her place within the group of the righteous.

If the 144,000 male virgins work to embody John's conception of utopic maleness, then it seems reasonable to assert that the Whore of Babylon would be a fitting dystopic foil to the Christian community envisioned in chapter 14. In fact, Tina Pippin argues that the Whore and the beasts function as the "embodiment of evil," and represent the crux of John's dystopic world in which the status quo of continued subservience to the Roman empire is symbolized by female sexual power operating outside of male control (1992:21). However, it is my contention that the Whore of Babylon does not function solely as a feminine embodiment of evil, but actually represents the most complicated overlap between John's dys/utopic discourse as she simultaneously symbolizes both dystopic and utopic bodies, places, and times. The Whore of Babylon resides in female form at the intersection between fulfilling utopic desires for a future place and time as well as symbolizing the association between dystopic past and present. Thus, baring a critical eye both toward the troubling gendered and sexual imagery in this passage as well as beyond it to the other dys/utopic images and motifs in this vision helps us recognize that gender is one expression of, but not necessarily the only narrative strategy, that John employs as he works through his anxieties about present and future bodies, space, and time.

It is certainly not difficult to point to instances in the text in which the Whore of Babylon embodies a hypersexualized projection of male perceptions regarding uncontrolled, active feminine power. In particular, Stenström has pointed out the ways in which the Whore of Babylon, as a woman existing, and even prospering, outside of the control of a male figure would surely have been viewed as "stripped of their female honor" and "sexually (and in other senses) aggressive and dangerous" (2006:36). Others, such as Barbara Rossing, are quick to dismiss the disconcerting representations of women expressed in the Whore of Babylon as part of an ethical contrast which is immediately transformed into city once this exhortative goal is

signaled (1999: 14). It is my contention that none of these scholars devote ample attention to the ways in which reading Whore of Babylon as simultaneously body, place, *and* time in John's disorienting dys/utopic critique of the socio-political situation of his community works to internalize relationships of power that enfold, but extend beyond, male/female gender hierarchies.

While characterization of the Whore of Babylon as not only a sexually unregulated prostitute, but also "the mother of whores and the Earth's abominations" is undoubtedly offensive and painful in its vilification of the reproductive potential of women and its vehement rejection of female sexual desire, it is important to unpack this image as part of a greater exhibition of the possible dystopic consequences of maintaining the status quo (17.5). Furthermore, deconstructing the vision of both the Whore's rise to power and ultimate destruction as at once representative of undesirable bodies, places, and times reaffirms the notion that dys/utopias are always socially and historically situated and thus subject to re-evaluation and reconstruction.

To begin, the Whore of Babylon is certainly a symbolic body that represents the site of fornication and illicit sexual activity as a synecdoche for a wide range of perceived social evils, including complacent submission to and participation in the economic injustice of Roman rule. The text claims "the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her," and in so doing, these kings and merchants grow unduly wealthy as a result of their sexual congress with and elected subordination to her (18.3, 18.9-19). As with Jezebel, the Whore's destruction is brought about in a violently sexual, divinely sanctioned revolt in which the ten horns and the beast will "make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose" (Rev. 18.16-17).

The gendered and sexual imagery that underlie her violent destruction, however, have masked a potentially important wrinkle in John's dys/utopic imaginary. While the future destruction of the Whore must ultimately work to bring about the New Jerusalem when the "words of God will be fulfilled", the complacent submission of those on Earth which calls for such violently destructive divine intervention is certainly part of John's dystopian critique of the status quo (17.18). Thus, the text cannot seem to unify itself over whether to lament over the social evils which empowered the Whore or to rejoice over her actions and those of her male counterparts, which catch the attention of the divine and work to bring about John's utopia. In order to reconcile this textual ambiguity, we must attempt to cast our eyes beyond the Whore of Babylon as only symbolic body and begin to recognize how she functions spatially and temporally as both fully realized imperial past and yet to be determined future. In so doing, we may glean a keener sense of the ways in which utopias and dystopias function as "significant indicators of the horizon of thoughts, dreams, desires, fears, and self-understanding of the community in which they develop" and arise out of particular conceptions of community and social situation (Ben Zvi 2006:4).

As this dys/utopic vision begins, John is carried away "by the spirit into a wilderness" (17.3). As he relates the nature of this to his audience in the narrative present, he admits his own affective reaction to spectacle of the Whore of Babylon and the beast that accompanies her. Sensing John's reaction, an angel enigmatically states, "the inhabitants of the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will be amazed when they see the beast, because it *was* and *is not* and *is to come*" (17.8, emphasis mine). This scrambled temporality, in which an author in the narrative present writes of a past vision of a future that has yet to be realized, appeals to both a shared past, present, and possible future for

John's community. Thus, time works in John's dystopic critique to cryptically align the reign of the Whore of Babylon with a perception of a analogous past, namely the conquest and imperial domination of the Israelites by the Babylonian empire and implies that, if social ills are not corrected, a similar situation "is not and is to come" (17.8). Therefore, Babylon functions as a critical axis of past, present, and future time and place upon which the force of John's dystopic fear rhetoric is exerted in the minds of an audience who would have been familiar with this history and frightened by its implications for the future.

As the hypersexualized and misogynistic image of the Whore of Babylon extends beyond female embodiment and comes into focus as representative of a communal understanding of both desirable and undesirable temporal and spatial settings, we begin to get a sense of the ways in which John's dys/utopic discourse functions rhetorically to discipline his audience in very particular ways. For Michel Foucault, discourse functions as a subtle form of power connected to knowledge that arranges and disciplines people by appealing to and proliferating a range of undeniable "truths" that everyone apparently "knows" (1990: 101). The Whore of Babylon's association with an undesirable imperial past (of which everyone is aware) empowers his audience to envision the disastrous effects of an analogous situation as that which their ancestors experienced half a millennium prior. Furthermore, John claims that, during the vision of destruction which takes place on Earth before John's vision of the Whore, "God remembered great Babylon and gave her the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath" in order to appeal to a common history and to internalize a fear of the ever-impending, but not yet realized, wrath of the divine as a means to effect a desired rebellious attitude within his community (16.19).

This dys/utopic discourse is also manifested by the repetition of scripts in the Whore's funeral dirge that attempts to counteract the audience's desire for the luxuries afforded to the

Whore of Babylon and her consorts. Although the Whore hubristically asserted prior to her destruction “I rule as a queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief,” the impermanence of her power and desirability are undermined by the claim that “her plagues will come in a single day” (18.7-8). This language of impermanence, then, is continually repeated as the kings, merchants, and shipmasters who had grown wealthy from desiring her state that “in one hour” all of these things were destroyed (18.9, 18.15, 18.19). Thus, this dystopic scene of evils that will befall the Whore of Babylon and her followers if they continue to associate with her attempts to expose the audience to the desire for/of worldly luxury and wealth and then to purge this by underscoring its impermanence and danger as all things are ultimately subject to the will of the divine.

Recognizing the ways in which the Whore of Babylon works as simultaneously body, space, and place in John’s dys/topic imaginary helps us avoid reaffirming the power of gender configurations in the text by implicating them in a wider range of attempts to internalize certain relationships of power between the community, John, and the ever-present possibility of divine destruction and judgment. Thus, the power of John’s dys/utopic rhetoric does not lie entirely within the desire of a masculine audience for the death of a particular female body, but rather in the community’s fear, based on a body of shared “truths,” of the power of God’s wrath against the evil that John perceives them to be committing. Finally, as we begin to recognize the ways in which this image is firmly situated within the context of the shared history, fears, and behaviors of a particular community, the dissonance between our dys/utopias and John’s comes into stark relief. Because John’s dys/utopia is rendered unstable and malleable as a result of its socio-historical situation as an expression of the shared desires, fears, and history of a specific group of

people, overemphasizing the gendered imagery robs us of the opportunity provided in the text for us to envision our own utopias independent of John's troubling imaginary.

Bearing in mind the unstable masculine ideal as embodied by the 144,000 as well as the dys/utopic past, present, and future of the community embedded within the image of the Whore of Babylon, it is now necessary to turn to a critical examination of the Bride/New Jerusalem as the ultimate expression of John's vision of a utopian future. To begin, the audience is met with a "bride adorned for her husband" (21:2), as this spectacularly paradisiacal landscape descends to Earth from heaven. However, unlike the 144,000 and the Whore of Babylon, the Bride/New Jerusalem is never allowed to embody her gendered role in the text, but becomes merely "the home of God among mortals" in which the ideal 144,000 males dwell with the divine and enjoy the wealth of gold and other jewels that she hosts but of which she can never take part (Rev. 15.13-21, Okland 2006: 105). However, if we investigate the nuptial imagery and passive femininity of the Bride/New Jerusalem more closely we begin to see the ways in which John's utopia does not reflect a resistance to, but rather maintenance of, the very ideology of submissiveness that his dys/utopic rhetoric works to critique.

As the angel leads John on a tour of "the bride, the Wife of the Lamb," the audience is met with a tremendous display of wealth, as the city is "adorned with every jewel" which exhorts the audience to redirect their desire for luxury away from the worldly wealth of the Roman Empire toward that of the New Jerusalem. Huber argues that this nuptial imagery of a wife prepared for her husband manipulates "traditional views of gender and marriage, including elements associated with the Roman wedding, to prompt the audience to envision a new image of the domus" (171). Thus, John compels his audience to see beyond the menial luxuries afforded

to them by complacent submission to the Roman empire and to envision a new place based on the community's conceptions of a perfected social space.

However, as John begins to see this vision of a fully realized, yet not fully enacted future, the divine proclaims that "Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be my God and they will be my children" (21.7). As in the opening, a sense of masculine conquest is essential to correcting and purging feminine influence as part of a utopic ideal. This attempted conquest of all feminine influence and emasculating influences from within its gates, however, is later rendered unstable. In 20.17, as "The Spirit and the bride say 'Come,'" the men's desires to live out an eternity of sensuous excess together in a city "adorned with every jewel" as well as abundance of food and drink are routed through the female figure of the Bride (21.19,22.2). Thus, it seems that the fulfillment of the sensuous desires of the male-identified Christians works to further cement John's association of utopia with masculinity and dystopia with femininity. As Sedgwick has noted, "the status of women, and the whole question of arrangements between genders, is deeply and inescapably inscribed in the structure even of relationships that seem to exclude women" (1985:25). Thus, the firmness of patriarchal masculine power is reaffirmed by the apparent domination and exploitation of feminine space.

Furthermore, as the city itself takes shape it is clear that all the men that inhabit the female figure are dependent upon her in order to maintain the wealth and prosperity of this all-male utopia, just as they were on the Whore of Babylon. The Bride/New Jerusalem contains not only opulent displays of jewels, but also "the river of the water of life," and "the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit" which are ostensibly required for the inhabitants to remain alive (22.1-2). Thus, without her presence, John's utopia is unsustainable, as all of the figures who inhabit her are critically dependent on her existence and sustained presence. Thus, the feminine is

required to sustain and reinstall the masculinity of those who inhabit her and John's attempt to eradicate the feminine ultimately fails to live up to its own ideals. Therefore, the bride undermines the reign of ideal masculinity she is not merely a container for John's ideal, but critically necessary to its sustainability and desirability.

III. Conclusions

Finally, we must return to the question of action previously diagnosed as the critical interpretive question plaguing feminist and gender critical interpretations of Revelation. As we evaluate the nature of dys/utopic imaginaries as arising out of "perceived deficiencies of the present, or at least in the view of those composing the utopian or dystopian work," we must decide whether or not this widely disseminated vision of a utopic future is one that is at all desirable or implementable for us in our contemporary socio-historical contexts (Ben Zvi 2006:23).

An analysis of gender and sexuality in John's dys/utopic narrative highlights the ways in which his visions arise out of a particular concern with the status quo, and his solution to this problem is therefore related to and cast in the ideology of his own socio-historical location. Through the fraught image of the 144,000 "ideal" men, the troubling power relationships established through the symbol of the Whore of Babylon, and the reconstitution of existing ideologies in the Bride/New Jerusalem, it is evident that John's utopian imaginary is thwarted at every turn by the persistent presence of the undesirable existing in the present—the dystopian, rendered feminine. Thus, a critical examination of the stability, sustainability, and desirability of the space envisioned by John in gendered and sexual ways empowers us to resist reinforcing the power of these images. Within the temporal liminality of what "is" and "must soon take place"

we must recognize the “provisional nature of all utopian systems [which] encourages readers to employ their own imagination” (22.6, Ben Zvi 2006:18).

This inherent provisionality to all utopias provides ample space for subversive repetitions of John’s utopian and dystopian scripts in ways that undermine the apparent all-male exclusivity of John’s conceptions of intelligible Christian identity. As we critically evaluate and proceed beyond the disconcerting gendered and sexual elements of John’s utopia, we must recognize that his vision has not yet taken place. While this argument in no way attempts to deny the possibility for overturning the status quo as described in Revelation, I believe that John’s narrative allows space for us to envision a utopia that is not apolitical, but begins to enact a new kind of perfect place in which solutions to that which is found lacking in our contemporary social and political locations can be realized.

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